Chapter XI

THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN POLK COUNTY

The need for public schools was paramount in the thinking of the first settlers of Polk County. The urgency for schools was reflected by the action taken by the three county commissioners before the first general election of county officers in December, 1872, when the board of three commissioners appointed the first County Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Richard J. Reis. The organization of the county did not take place until early in the following year.

The early history of the public schools of Polk County has been fully covered by a former County Superintendent of Schools N. A. Thorson in the HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY OF POLK COUNTY published in 1916. Copies of this history are found in the libraries of the county.

Only a brief resume of observations of the writer will be made of the schools before 1916. It is difficult for one today to realize the original land area and the school problems involved in such a diverse region. The portion of the original county, east of our present county line, was detached to Beltrami County before any schools were established. The county lost nineteen school districts when the area north of the Clay and Becker counties, north to the present southern line of Polk county, was detached from Polk to form Norman County. Additional school districts were lost when Red Lake County was formed out of the north central part of Polk County.

Marked progress in the effectiveness of teaching in the rural schools has been made during the writer's fifty years observations of the schools in Polk and other Red River Valley counties. State aids to rural schools not only enabled the districts to secure better teachers, but to get that aid the schools had to meet state specifications regarding heating, lighting and sanitation. The educational qualifications of teachers were raised through the years, from permits with little normal training on up to four years of normal school or its equivalent with salary premiums today on the amount of graduate training.

The first big step forward was the building of the two-teacher schools, of which there were a number in Polk County. In other less populous districts, farm families cooperated in transporting their children to village or town schools and paid tuition. The real big step was made when the districts around Eldred consolidated and dedicated the first consolidated school in the county in 1912. It was a gala night for Eldred and rural education when a special trainload of people and George E. Vincent helped the community dedicate their building. The Trail Consolidated School was dedicated in 1914.

The evolutionary changes going on in the improvement of quality of teaching, improved facilities, loss in numbers of pupils attending rural schools and improved methods of transportation